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**HEADLINE:** Schools in crisis, officials say;  
Baltimore lawmakers seek emergency status for beleaguered system

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**BODY:**

Baltimore lawmakers want city, state and federal officials to declare a state of emergency for the city school system, vexed by a \$31 million budget deficit, high lead levels in the drinking water and the impending departure of its superintendent.

Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden, an East Baltimore Democrat, told members of the Senate Education, Health and Environment Committee yesterday that the city schools are in desperate need of resources to fix the system's problems.

McFadden is sponsoring a resolution urging the declaration in hopes of obtaining the needed help.

"It's a real bad situation," McFadden told the committee. "But we are going to turn this system around, I promise you."

McFadden said that if government fails to take action, some city residents are preparing to file a lawsuit against the school system.

But some question whether the stigma of a declaration of a state of emergency could create other problems for the school system, including demoralizing students, teachers and staff.

"I think it's unfair and untrue to make a blanket statement that the school system is a disaster," former Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman said in an interview. "It isn't what it ought to be, and it isn't what it's going to be. But it has improved."

Sen. Paula C. Hollinger, a Baltimore County Democrat and committee chairwoman, questioned whether such a declaration would force the city or state to commit to allocating money at a time of fiscal crisis.

"There's no question to us that the schools are in a state of emergency," Hollinger said. "I just wonder what kind of liability this opens the school system up to."

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The hearing yesterday followed Baltimore City schools chief Carmen V. Russo's announcement this week that she is resigning from the system's top job June 30, with one year left on her four-year contract.

The 67-year-old Russo -- credited by many for beginning highly praised reforms and criticized by others for a multimillion-dollar budget shortfall -- said Tuesday that she was moving to Florida to accept a job with a private foundation.

Russo's decision touched off widespread criticism in Annapolis as Baltimore lawmakers have worked throughout the legislative session and recent years to win more money for city schools. The lawmakers said difficulty in retaining superintendents has made it hard to build and maintain solid reforms in the school system.

In addition, McFadden said, more money is needed to help resolve such immediate problems as high concentrations of lead in the school water. The problem led the city Health Department to issue citations at several schools.

The school system is spending millions of dollars to provide bottled water.

Baltimore community activists said during yesterday's hearing that they believe the state could cut some of the funds that now go to such entities as private colleges to help the city's schools.

"The money is there," said Tyrone Powers, of the Children 1st Movement and a part of a pending lawsuit against the schools, the city and the Health Department for negligence. "What we're asking for is not pie-in-the-sky."

**GRAPHIC:** Photo(s), Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden is sponsoring a resolution to declare a state of emergency for the city school system.; SUN STAFF : 2000

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